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## Crafting Better Rural-Focused Postsecondary Policy by Identifying Rural-Serving Institutions

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## **Crafting Better Rural-Focused Postsecondary Policy by Identifying Rural-Serving Institutions**

**Andrew Koricich**

Colleges and universities that serve rural communities come in different shapes and sizes—community colleges and research universities; liberal arts colleges and comprehensive regional public universities; small, intimate campuses and those that are as big as a small city. One common thread connecting them is their special mission to provide educational access and support overall community wellbeing in rural places. However, rural-serving institutions (RSIs) are frequently overlooked in broader public policy conversations—and in academic research—about rural education in the United States.

One contributor to this lesser focus is that there has been no uniform definition or framework for identifying RSIs in different geographic contexts across the country. Rural colleges have traditionally been identified as such based solely on whether the place in which they are located is classified as “rural” under some selected classification scheme. There are two primary weaknesses to this approach. First, there is no one agreed-upon definition of rurality, but rather many definitions that get used many different ways (Manly et al., 2020). This means that the collection of rural colleges can vary widely based on the chosen definition, and this limits comparability or generalizability when seeking to better understand, or create better policy for, this sector of institutions. Secondly, an exclusively rural-located approach automatically excludes any college or university that is not in a place classified as rural, even if they are doing important service to rural students and communities. This is especially true for large, land-grant universities, many of which have had an urbanizing effect on their surrounding region as they have grown in enrollments and complexity over time, as well as for community colleges and regional colleges located, for example, in the outermost suburbs of larger urban areas, where they may be the closest college for the region’s rural students.

Thus, there has long been a clear need for a formal, evidence-based framework for identifying RSIs in different parts of the country that serve different types of rural communities through their diverse institutional missions. To that end, the team

at the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges (ARRC) spent nearly a year evaluating a range of federal data sets, talking to stakeholders representing diverse interests, and conducting iterative analyses to build a data infrastructure and framework for identifying RSIs in a way that considers and appreciates that these institutions are not a homogeneous group, but instead reflect the rich diversity of rural communities. This policy brief explores our approach and offers several important policy considerations that emerged from this work.

### **Metric**

Any attempt to identify RSIs must first tackle two fundamental challenges: determining what we mean by “rural” and by “serving.” With regard to the former, our team wanted to capture more of the nuance of rurality by using multiple data points to describe the regions in which institutions are situated. Therefore, we included data on the percentage of an institution’s “home” county that is classified as “rural” by the Census, the average percentage of the adjacent counties’ population classified as “rural,” the total county population size, and whether the county is adjacent to a metropolitan area. These last two data points come from the Rural-Urban Continuum Codes maintained by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Economic Research Service (2020). These codes are an ordinal scale that actually includes population size *and* metro adjacency, though our team chose to decouple these two after seeing how they function differently for our purposes. By using four, complementary measures, we were able to account for more of the variation and nuance of rural places across the country, as opposed to applying a singular measure.

The second challenge lies in defining the “serving” of rural-servingness. Serving rural students is, naturally, an important part of being an RSI, but our ability to determine how many rural students are at all campuses nationwide is inhibited by a lack of such data in federal data systems. However, conducting exploratory analyses with data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, we

uncovered that the majority of students at rural-located institutions come from rural places and that only a very small percentage of urban students attend rural colleges. Coupled with research showing that the majority of freshmen students at public four-year colleges travel 50 miles or less to college (Eagan et al., 2016), this led us to include data for adjacent counties as a proxy for non-existent, student-level data. However, we also wanted to consider aspects about what institutions *do* that are in service to rural places, and so we also account for the percentage of an institution's certificates and degrees are conferred in areas of unique rural importance: Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Parks & Recreation.

This measure and the four location measures were used to create an index score that compares all institutions *to each other*, as opposed to examining them in a vacuum as would be the case in a strict definitional approach. This resulted in a score ranging from 0 to 4 for each of the 2,525 public or private, not-for-profit institutions that award at least an associate's degree and do not have a specialized programmatic mission (e.g., seminaries, health sciences schools, etc.). We deemed any institution with an RSI Score above the mean (1.175) to be an RSI, and those with a score higher than 2.095 (one standard deviation above the mean) were labeled as "High RSIs" (Koricich et al., 2022) to underscore that RSIs are not a monolith. This resulted in 1,087 RSIs, which at first can seem like a very high number until we consider that 97% of our nation's land area is classified as "rural" (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016), and these communities need access to postsecondary education, too.

The RSIs we identify through this metric include land-grant universities, community colleges, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Tribal Colleges, and more, and they serve nearly 5 million students from communities that are thriving, as well as those facing persistent poverty, low employment, and population loss. To review our complete methodology, read a descriptive profile of these institutions, and access the comprehensive map tool that allows you to interact with our data, visit [www.regionalcolleges.org/project/ruralserving](http://www.regionalcolleges.org/project/ruralserving).

### Policy Considerations

Although this project sought to build a data infrastructure and framework for use by a wide range of institutional, governmental, scholarly, and philanthropic stakeholders, one primary aim was providing better information and insight to legislative

and executive policymakers interested in supporting these institutions. At the state level, this framework can be a useful tool for analyzing state funding and determining whether RSIs are being funded equitably compared to non-RSIs. This consideration is especially important when considering that RSIs are more dependent upon state appropriations (Koricich et al., 2022) and that smaller institutions often do not enjoy the same economies of scale as larger institutions, which can result in goods and services being more expensive than for their larger, urban peers. Therefore, it is possible that this lens can identify opportunities to amend state funding formulas to provide more equitable funding to RSIs. Furthermore, rural colleges are often one of the largest—if not *the* largest—employer in their region (McClure et al., 2021), and this metric may also help inform state-level programs intended to foster economic development.

This RSI metric can also be instructive regarding federal policies in support of these institutions. Part Q of the Higher Education Act, titled "Rural Development Grants for Rural-Serving Colleges and Universities" is a provision that has been authorized but has had no funds appropriated to carry out the program. The stated purpose of Part Q is to: 1) increase postsecondary enrollment and graduation rates of rural secondary school graduates and non-traditional students, and 2) promote economic growth and economic development in rural communities. Part Q requires "rural-serving institutions of higher education" to establish partnerships with other local (rural) educational agencies and at least one regional employer, with the option to also partner with other RSIs, and defines a "rural-serving institution of higher education" to be one that primarily serves rural areas, with "rural areas" being places defined as such by a governmental agency in their respective state (Congress.gov, n.d.). The legislation does not describe what is meant by "serving" rural areas, and this could be multifaceted to include enrolling local students, offering academic programs of particular local relevance, employing local residents, providing certain services to the local community at-large, and so on. Additionally, by only using the definition of "rural" selected by individual states, it would be possible for state governments to select definitions that are most advantageous for the purposes of these grants. Although the technical aspects of our RSI Score may not be suitable for direct use in Part Q, or potentially a new piece of legislation altogether, it can be instructive by demonstrating the value and

feasibility of considering multiple measures when setting eligibility criteria.

Beyond the Higher Education Act, the USDA's Office of Rural Development administers a number of funding programs that can be accessed by RSIs. One such program is the Community Facilities Programs that offer direct loans, grants, and loan guarantees to enhance public services and facilities in rural communities (USDA Rural Development, n.d.a). Another relevant program is the Rural Placemaking Innovation Challenge that encourages collaborative efforts to "create quality places where people will want to live, work, play and learn" (USDA Rural Development, n.d.b), and higher education institutions are eligible to apply for funds.

## Conclusion

There are many other policy spaces and programs that could benefit RSIs than can be covered here, and there are also a number of important implications for campus practitioners, college administrators, school counselors and others. Ours is just one way to make sense of the diverse collection of colleges and universities that serve rural students and communities, but we hope that this approach helps shift conversations away from which rural definition is the "best" and toward one that considers multiple ways of understanding rurality. These institutions and their unique, rural-serving mission are worth understanding and supporting. Our team hopes that this is the start of many conversations and welcomes feedback.

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